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Deconstructing the Human Gaze

Stray Dogs, Indifferent Governance and Prejudiced Reactions

Rather than implement animal birth control through sterilisation and adhere to the rules of solid waste management, the municipal authority in Bangalore recently launched a programme to kill all stray dogs. This is only an eyewash, meant to placate certain groups and gain political mileage.

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Recently, the chief minister of Karnataka flagged off a campaign in Bangalore city to kill stray dogs and there is a talk of similar measures in Mumbai and elsewhere. This commentary though is not about animal rights, but about us, i.e., human beings, and more specifically, about our gaze. In advocating the killing of stray dogs we encounter a human gaze that is not only deeply prejudiced, but also one that is arrogant carrying the imprimatur of the superiority of the human species over all other forms of life. For not only is the mass killing of stray dogs violent, unethical, and discriminatory, it also defies scientific knowledge with respect to control of stray dog populations and rabies.

First of all there is an inherent problem with the very idea of strays. The truth is that animals we call strays are more often than not companions of the poor who (care deeply enough for them to share what little they have with them) cannot afford to collar and leash them or walk them or even have enough space to house them. Secondly, there is the issue of pedigree. Strays are not 'jathi nai' (as pedigree dogs are referred to in Chennai, for instance) or English 'kuttha' (Mumbai), they are 'pariah' dogs, they are dirty and unsafe.¹

Extermination Argument

Let us closely examine the rationale provided for the extermination argument. It is contended that stray dogs are dangerous because they bite, and their bites are dangerous because they transmit rabies. What statistics on bite cases do not tell you is that, contrary to popular belief, every

bite does not transmit rabies, or even cause a serious injury. Further, stray dogs rarely attack without provocation, and not every street dog that bites has rabies. A 2003 WHO-sponsored survey² estimates the annual human rabies burden in India to be 20,565 (including atypical cases of rabies), i.e., 2 per 1,00,000 population.³ The WHO survey also estimates the annual animal bite load to be 1.74 million.⁴ This indicates that only 0.118 per cent of animal bites actually result in rabies. What numbers about bite cases also conceal is the root cause of the large dog population on our streets – the overflowing garbage bins, and the violation by the public and by the local government, of the Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules (MSW Rules), 2000.

ABC Programme

The passing of the Animal Birth Control Rules in 2001 brought a legal halt to the violent and ineffective practice of killing stray dogs in the name of rabies control.⁵ However, the last few years have seen a move to resume killing on the grounds that the animal birth control (ABC) programme has not been successful. What is being overlooked in the hue and cry about stray dog bites and attacks is that if the ABC programme has not worked till now, it is because local self-governments have not been active enough providing resources for and implementing the programme. A few NGOs are vested with all the responsibility for the ABC programme in most cities, without recognising that the resources and efforts required for a successful ABC programme are beyond their capacity. The ABC programme as laid down by the Animal Birth Control Rules,

2001, is actually the responsibility of the local self-government, a fact that has been repeatedly ignored by all authorities. This is not to say that adequate resources are not available. In fact, during the mid-term evaluation of the 10th Five-Year Plan, the allocation for animal welfare was cut down because the money had not been spent!

In cities like Jaipur and Chennai, where the ABC programme is more efficient, the situation is remarkably different. In Chennai, for instance, the ABC programme was launched full swing in the year 1996; human deaths due to rabies have reduced from 140 in 1996 to just five in 2006.⁶ In Jaipur too, a study⁷ of the ABC and vaccination programme between 1994 and 2002 shows that the number of human cases of rabies seen in the main government hospital of the city between January 1992 and December 2002 declined to zero in the programme area but increased in other areas.

It is not for nothing that ABC is a procedure recommended by World Health Organisation. The ABC is widely recognised as being the only scientific method of controlling stray dog populations – for even if several thousands of dogs are slaughtered every day, many more will come in from adjoining areas as long as there is food available in the form of garbage on the streets. A region's borders are porous; dogs will enter, reproduce and repopulate areas from which they have been exterminated. This fact is reflected in the failure to control dog populations despite the several decades of consistently killing stray dogs.

Sustainable Solution

The only sustainable solution is for the local self-government to launch an intensive ABC campaign that follows scientific norms with regard to the minimum percentage of population that needs to be sterilised in order to prevent population growth, enlisting the support of residents and the poor "caretakers" of the "strays". The birth control programme must be supplemented with an annual vaccination programme, for which the possibility of oral rabies vaccines is being explored. In addition, the strict and effective implementation of the MSW Rules is a must – for removal of food sources (in the form of garbage on the streets) is vital to prevent congregation of dogs at public places and the attendant problems.

In the light of these facts, programmes to kill stray dogs like that recently launched

by the Bangalore Municipal Corporation, can best be termed as an “eyewash”, meant to placate certain groups and gain political mileage. If the local self-government and citizens’ groups that have been loudly lamenting the stray dog problem really wish to act productively and take concrete steps towards addressing the issue scientifically and effectively, they would be well advised to focus all resources and efforts on carefully designing and consistently implementing the animal birth control and vaccination programmes as well as the MSW Rules.

It would be easy to dismiss this commentary as the ramblings of an “animal lover” – an appellation with the same derogatory overtones as the “nigger lover” from the not too distant past. However, it is important to understand the real danger in advocating the genocide (literally a systematic destruction of a species or a gene pool) of stray dogs. In being party to this genocide, we take one more step towards making our society less humane and are at risk of putting to death the very things that stand to make us supposedly civilised. Every act

of killing, even of a species as “insignificant” as that of the stray dog, takes us one step closer to acts of violence towards other human beings. In a world that is already torn apart by senseless violence, a move to turn the full might of the state to killing systematically and in large numbers, defenceless beings whose only crime is that they are an ordinary (read non-exotic) non-human species can only be dangerously regressive. **EPW**

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Notes

- 1 For a discussion on use of caste names for animals, see Govindaswamy Agooramoorthy (2007), ‘Avoid Using Caste Names for India’s Beasts’, *Down to Earth*, Vol 15, No 17, January.
- 2 The study concludes that the incidence of rabies can be attributed to lack of proper post-exposure immunisation and identifies the “keys to success” in the further reduction of rabies in India as the improved coverage with modern rabies vaccines, canine rabies control, and intensifying public education about the disease.
- 3 M K Sudarshan et al (2007), ‘Assessing the

Burden of Human Rabies in India: Results of a National Multicentre Epidemiological Survey’, *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, January, 11 (1), pp 29-35, Epub 2006, May 4; retrieved on March 14, 2007, 0830 hrs, from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Retrieve&dopt=AbstractPlus&list_uids=16678463&query_hl=4&itool=pubmed_docsum

- 4 MK Sudarshan (2005-07–2005-09), ‘Assessing the Burden of Human Rabies in India: Results of a National Multicentre Epidemiological Survey’, *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, Vol 30, No 3; retrieved on March 14, 2007, 0825 hrs, from <http://www.indmedica.com/journals.php?journalid=7&issueid=5&articleid=712&action=article>.
- 5 It had been observed over the years that destruction was not having any sustained beneficial effect on the incidence of rabies.
- 6 Municipal commissioner Vijaykumar in the *New Indian Express*, May 31, 2006.
- 7 J F Reece and S K Chawla (2006), ‘Control of Rabies in Jaipur, India, by the Sterilisation and Vaccination of Neighbourhood Dogs’, *The Veterinary Record*, September 16, 159(12), pp 379-83; retrieved on March 14, 2007, 0840 hrs from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=pubmed&cmd=Retrieve&dopt=AbstractPlus&list_uids=16980523&query_hl=4&itool=pubmed_docsum

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